

**Interview with Lonnie Holley on July 27th 1997 [Hi-8 3A]  
Location: Holley's Art Environment, Zion City/Airport  
Hills, Birmingham, Alabama  
Interviewer: George King**

*[This interview, one of the first I conducted with Lonnie Holley, has been lightly edited for clarity. The transcriber has attempted to accurately reflect Holley's speech, including words he makes up to compensate for what he describes as a 5<sup>th</sup> grade education. I have capitalized "Environment" where it refers to the 2-acre Art Environment surrounding Holley's Airport Hills, Birmingham home. Excerpts that are in the finished documentary are highlighted in yellow. Excerpts highlighted in green were included in earlier edits.]*



GK: You have twenty-six brothers and sisters, are any of them artists?

LH: Ah, yeah, I think out of my mother's children, in a way, there are those of us that is artists and they don't know it. They do good things like I'm doing, but in different ways. They all don't just do material arts, such as me. I got a couple of brothers that have worked art with me, and went out and did workshops with me.

So, yeah, there are others that is talented and also skilled'd. All of my brother and sisters in a sense is skilled'd in different ways. And we didn't go out to be educated for that reason; these are habits that we picked up just by being a part of society. So, I would have to say, yeah, there are those that know that they are ar--, well, we never call them all artists. But I've told them about themselves being artists and what their skills and their talents could do if they wanted to.

But it's like they good in their profession. I have a couple, couple of brothers that's fishermen, and they like to go fishing all the time, they're very skilled'd in fishing. And it's an art to fishing to me, 'cause I can't fish that well. I got a couple of brothers that can build or can drive real good. So you know, we have to apply our skills but we don't always be called artists in applying those skills.

My auntie (Viola), she do different things. She make different things all the time. She sew more than she do anything else. I would call her an artist, because she did a lot things around the house that I could say, "that's a work of art to me." Because it's totally different from the art or the way that other peoples do those things. Her Christmas ornaments, the things that she just used around her that I've seen. And my grandmamma before she died, Hixie Canady, or my aunt Viola Thomas, that's who I was just talking about.

But Hixie Canady, my grandmother, on my daddy's side, my daddy's mother, she used to make things. She loved the wildflowers. I love wildflowers, I love just pure nature. I love just to see the things grow, just to walk in the midst of 'em, to part them, not so much to destroying them. But if I had to part them and make a path to go through them, I part them and walk through them. I know sometime I tromple them down and that I killed something, or I destroyed something in the midst of my walking. But me gathering wildflowers with my grandmamma when I were little, those kinda things... 'cause she called me her little wildflower.

To see the beauty in something that people would call bushes and weeds is a talent itself. My grandmamma used to take cigarette packs and things like that, and she used to make flowers out of 'em. She used to just take 'em and break 'em down and they would become flowers. I got one of her pieces in a secure place in my basement. I hadn't been down there in the last three years, so, hopefully everything is still in place 'cause I remember it getting broken in one time. When I returned, I just sealed it up. But hopefully my grandmamma's works are still there. And my grandmamma, before she died got a chance to come and see my Environment being made. And my mom got a chance to see me working here. So, they actually got a chance to come in my house while I've lived here, and they knew what I was doing.

I don't think they knew why I was doing it. They knew I was doing art because my mother had been invited out by great men such as Congressman Albert Lee Smith, here in the State of Alabama. The Congressman had a dinner for my mother because my mother had the twenty-seven children. So, my mother was celebrated on that high scale or high level and I appreciate that.

I see 'em constantly ask the question, "Who am I?" Because I'm seeking to know even more of the depths of myself. But I look at what my grandfather, my mother, my sisters and my brothers, have done around me. My oldest brother, is a construction worker, he can lay out something, we can build a bridge for you right now, just the Holleys. We can do anything that we need to do. And we got a family--it's fifteen of us that's still living, I think, with the eight boys and the seven girls that is still living out of my mother's children. We can get together and do something tremendous--if we got together. But it's just that we, we all didn't have the same father, so we didn't all think along the same lines.

For one thing, I think to separate us, in saying why are the rest of 'em is not like you in production, or, why the rest of 'em don't do as much as you, as much thinking as you. Because I'm my father's only son, out of my mother's twenty-seven children, I belong to...only my father had me and, as far as I was told, in the family, two other girls. But I think there was one other girl that was my father's that we didn't know about. And if that's so, then my father woulda had three girls and one son. And I am that only son. I don't know whether I was the, the baby of the bunch, I think as far as my two older sisters, my flesh and, and the same blood and the same flesh, they are here in Birmingham.

Ah, and, as far as mentalities is concerned, I think we share a different kind of mentalities. I love them, but I think a lot, lot more than them. I, I use my thoughts. And I'm not saying that they hadn't thought millions of ideas about something, but just didn't bring them out of them.

GK: So where do you think it comes from? Do you think it's in the genes, or do you think it's something that happened to you? Why do you think you ended up doing this work?

LH: I think it's in the genes. I think it's gotta be in the genes. Because the Bradley part of me runs all the way back to a

historical kind of events that had happened out of my great grandparents and then my grandparents and then that's passed on down through my father, and then I think my father passed it on to me. And like I'm doing, My children is also artists. And their children probably will be also artists. So, what have been allowed for me is that a part of myself has been allowed to be recognized. And how did that come about? It was almost like a, a slip-up, or a mistake, or goodness, this guy is doing some work out there and the fire department come up during the time we had gotten the house burned down and all of a sudden this fireman looked down on the ground and say, "Who's doing this art?"

And I had all these things piled around me and not knowing that I was an artist and he say, "Well, good night, we got a professional artist here." And I'm thinking, who is it, who they talking about? You know, and it was me. And not knowing art, so it was surprise to know - I was just as much surprised to know that I was an artist as anyone else that - it was just they - it was revealed, and I was revealed. I was found. I woulda still been lost if that fireman had not looked down on the ground while putting our house out of fire and saw my works.

And immediately he called Channel 6. All of that is on record from 1979. If you look back through the archives of information, everything that I've said has been done. I remember the *Birmingham News* doing an *Alabama Journal* -- they had asked me what did I think about my future at that time. And I told them thousands and thousands of more pieces would be, I hoped to have created them, and I have created those thousands and thousands of more pieces. And those thousands and thousands of more pieces have hundreds and hundreds of bits of information sometime in one or two pieces (alone). So that think, that theme, "A picture is worth more than a thousand words." I think I'm kinda the creator of that picture and the persons look at it, it help them be able to realize that there are more than a thousand ideas and thoughts coming from them to add to that picture.

So as an artist, the rarity might have been that I was my father's only son and I inherited something that flows through the genes of the child or firstborn. My father was his father's only son, and I don't know whether my grandfather was my great-grandfather's only son, but I do know I met my great-

grandfather and he had Indian and white man in him. And my father had Negro and Indian in him.

So, I have Indian and Negro in me. And as far as my mother is concerned, I think in my granddaddy's family tree, there is some white in his family tree, and also some – and I know the boldness of that big thick African – I mean my grandfather stood a little over six and a half or six and a half feet tall, big, big, big man. You can look at my lips or my nose and tell the bigness of my grandfather. So, husky, husky man. My mother got up to three, three-fifty to four hundred pounds and her thickness, looking like one of those big...if you looked in Africa, and you wondered about the stock or the size of my mother, she look'ted to be either from the Zulu or the tribe over there in Africa, right there by the Kilimanjaro--the nomads. She look'ted like them. You can see the big, big – if you saw that – if you look at the mammy picture on what is Aunt Jemima on the pancake box, that was truly my Alabama mother.

She look'ted like that. I mean, when she got in the kitchen, her big long dress, you knew that she, you know, her hips and things. So, she had me when she was twenty-five years old, so she was in her, just coming into the firmness of a good-sized woman, or a good-developed woman when she had me. So I don't think it was very much alcohol in her life, or she hadn't been into a lot of drugs or things like that, I wasn't one of the children that was born in the period of her life where...I was right there in the firm, healthy part of her life. So she had a good baby when she had me, and I turned out to not overdo any drugs myself, or not overdo any – I never really had any interest to put anything in my veins, 'cause I - (*chuckles*) I don't even want the doctor, I don't, I don't like doctors, I really don't like going to doctors. I got a lot of doctor friends, but I haven't had them to really, really penetrate or to really, really inject anything into my skin.

I'm at maybe two aspirins a day here. I do partake in some alcohol consumption if I am at a party or there is some party that I go out. And I do do things with my friends that - just moderate, I don't – I don't like to go to very many – a lot of people say, "He never hardly be at our openings," or, "He never hardly be at our receptions." Because I have a tendency, and I know my habits, I have to a tendency to be a little bit talkative, and a lot of peoples don't like to hear me on and on, and go on and on and on and on. So, when I'm around my friends I get to talking and I, and I've noticed what kind of response from

them I get, and I prefer to do that in a classroom or where the students are gonna be listening at me.

GK: Were you always a big talker?

LH: Ah, I think so. As a cook, I had to say, “Good morning, good morning, good morning,” I had to keep on saying what it is that you wanted, ah, I had to be talked to and in return, I had to respond. So working in the kind of places that I worked, I worked at places like country clubs, that have hundreds of peoples coming in and dining at one time. I worked at places where the mind had to be involved with a lot of people. I worked at Disney World, there in Orlando, Florida. And that’s a lot of traffic of a lot of peoples and the “Yes, sir” and the “Yes, ma’am” or “How you want your order?” I was constantly talking all day long, constantly talking.



[Holley was 21 years old when this photograph made—he is in there somewhere as one of the chefs!]

So, it got to be a habit, but not a unnecessary habit. Because I think the art took it to another level of talk for me, instead of talking for – behind the counter, or talking from behind the pulpit, which my grandmother and my mother would have liked of me to be. My sisters and my brothers now would like for me to come and join the church and sit in the church every Sunday with them. Or be there, as they want to say, “Let’s reunion, let’s, let’s unionize ourself.” I try to do it, but I think, as an artist, ah, everybody’s not gonna hear me. And I don’t like that kind of audience where I’m giving out orders and those orders are not being taken advantage of.

GK: Did you ever think about preaching?

LH: I prefer to teach. Preaching, for me, you have to get excited. I don’t say God don’t be done touched a lot of people, but – I imagine He probably do that same thing for me in His own way. I imagine if I was a Baptist minister or, or Epis- Epis- Episcladasterik or a - They got so many different denominations.

And that’s what I really wanted to cut out a lot of the middlemen. And cutting out a lot of the middlemen, it wasn’t that I wanted to say to you, Mr. Preacher, or you, Miss Preacher, that you should not continue to do what you’re doing, or I would not listen at you. I’ve listened for years and years of my grandmamma and my mother and I also listen at the gospel on the radio and I listen at gospel singing, and I appreciate all of them things that has come from just individuals knowing that they are serving God in their own way. But I had a higher way of serving God.

Because I saw the God that I was serving to be a universal God, and this universal God have all these different planets that we in our minds could grow to care for. And not only this planet on Earth that we grow to care for, but knowing that it’s a universal God, and knowing that that God, at some point, is going to come to one conclusion, even though that there is many fingers on my hand, and there is many parts of Earth, and all of us never having the same mentality, and never having the same language patterns, speak patterns, mental conceptive way of giving ideas and thoughts. We’ll never understand each other. But my way of Biblically understanding the Bible and what had happened in the old days showed me the proof of this new day and that this nation,

the United States of America, is a leading educator to all those other educations, and with that happening, I would never say, "Stop pastoring," or "Stop preaching, you all."

Because surely you all are the light of the children. You all are the hope of those that is low and depressed, mentally and physically. You all are the ones that uplift their spirits with your talents and your skills. So, I would not say "Stop" or I would say in order to be better, why don't you all unionize your way of preaching, try to bring it to one flower, in a sense, and let it blossom out. I always had ideas and thoughts about mens that I like'ted in the preaching field. And he's dead and gone now, but his name was Herbert W. Armstrong. He used to come on late at night. After you laying down trying to get to sleep in the parts of thinking that you do before sleep, he would be preaching in the midst of those thoughts for me.

And Billy Graham is another real, real high-strung preacher that I like'ted ah, that came on the scene. And here in Alabama, was a pastor by the name of Bishop Grovey (sp?). I, I like'ted his work, and I like'ted what he did as far as being directly and straight to the point, not fooling you about your earthly habits. You don't need to be fooled about earthly habits. You are human, therefore you are. You are above apes and monkeys, gorillas and those animals of that sort, so your mentality always is supposed to be above that, to be caretaker of all beasts and creatures, to be the caretaker of all this Earth and to be the harvesters, to keep this Earth from having so many faults. And we as a people – that's what I'm saying with my whole Environment – and I am a preacher in a way. Like that lady said the other day, "You're a preacher, you're a, you're a scholar, you're a, a speaker, you are a archaeologist –" I'm all of these things in one.

And a lot of peoples don't like that, 'cause they say, "Why, how can you proclaim yourself to be all those things?" Because I actually have dug with my fingers--not with a shovel, in the ground. And I moved from that ground some glass that was blown out of a kiln and modified to be the drinking glass or the hot sauce bottle or your Clorox bottle or the glass container of the Fifties, the Forties and the Thirties. It's still around me, so I may take my pick and break that ground and see the period of that, and when I, what one would say, excavate that from the ground. I did the same thing that any other trained archaeologist would have done, but I trained myself, so I didn't have to pay you, Mr. Professor, I didn't have to pay you for you



to train me. And sometimes that's why some of these teachers may get angry, 'cause they say, "Well, he went beyond me and he didn't let me teach him."

I imagine if I hadda been taught by all the teachers that have their mind on me now, I would be one of the smartest young mens on Earth. And I have been taught by a lot of people. Because I've been taught, individually, I didn't learn it in the schools, but I took and learned it - I learned it outside the school door. Not that I didn't want to go to school, 'cause I did, but I had got shamed in school after I got out of Juvenile [*The Alabama Industrial School for Negro Children.*]

When I got out of Juvenile, everybody called me a jailbird - I didn't fit. And that's what I want to say to the students and the children, because I know that there is some students gonna be watching your film, George. And when they watch this film, they'll find out that we do get low. Our mentalities get down so low, we don't even care about life no more, but I say not only can art pick you up from that, 'cause art have done that for me! I don't sit around here and cry every day, I cry now, I still cry, and I worry because I have to be alone most of the time, I'm a lone, lonesome kind of person. As far as relationships is concerned, a part of my life had to do without that in order for my art to develop.

And I'm saying to that homeless child, to that child that's a runaway, or to that one that has no reason to want to stay around home, "Don't get mad with the world that you are living on, or the Earth that you're living on, and take it out on them because of human mentalities around you. And if there are human mentalities around you that keeps you from believing in yourself, and if you don't believe in yourself, are you still alone?"

If you don't believe in yourself - self is what we have to believe in. Each time somebody do something to me and it makes me real, real upset or angry, I have to rely on myself to come to grips within myself. Knowing here that that has happened, put it in my mind, digest it in a sense, in a mental way, figure it out, put it in perspective. I can put it in this stone, or I can put it into this iron metal piece that's in front of me, put it into this wooden piece. I can take it to another level [*Airplane roars overhead.*]

I had kinda been silent there for a while because that engine is a lot louder than I am and I can't compete with it. And that's the problem with me having to move away from here, because the engines will be louder because they're gonna have larger airplanes to come in. So I know that the airport is considering our health and our ears, our hearing, the amount of tremble or vibration that is gonna come from the airplane. [*Holley's daughter Angela appears.*] Thank you, Angela. That's my daughter, Angela, ah; her name is Angela Diana Bradley Holley. Angela, you wanna come around here where they can see you for a minute? This is my oldest daughter that's at home with me. And Angela is into books, right now she's into a good thing, because she's working at Books A Million.

When Angela was born, my hopes was for Angela to be a writer one day for me, I wanted her to be able to write about my life, write about her grandparents, and write about ah, what had happened to her as a woman, or what happens to womens, or whatever her subjects wanta be. So Angela is pursuing that in her own way. She has a daughter and my granddaughter name is Kayla Ashe Denise Holley and Angela is fixing to get ready to go get Kayla from daycare, so in a sense Kayla is already in school at one year and eight months, and ah, out of my children, all of my children are skilled'd, I would say, and I thank God for that.

I thank God none of my children did not come out being sickly. I have to thank myself for that, too - because I kept myself in good health. So when I did have a relationship with a woman, and she got pregnant, it was because I kept myself in good health too, young men. And you want to think about that, because if you do not keep yourself in good health, if you're not interested in what kind of blood you are putting off into the womb of a woman, then you may be putting something in there to kill her, and you may be done got that on the sly, or some slick kind of way of doing what you wanna do.

You see, we play games with our own personal human body. And sometimes those games result to little bitty things that we don't understand because we don't study our blood and we don't study our blood cells or we don't study the mixture, the cross between a positive and a negative. And what kinda effect that could happen. Do the woman be negative? Do the man be positive? Do the woman be positive? Do the man be negative? Do you to the clinic to find out what type of blood you have before having relationships with somebody?

So, out of all the relationships that I've had to bring forth my fifteen children, mostly all of the womens that I've ranned across, we was clean-blooded, two human clean-blooded beings. And when we got together, we had a perfect set of children. But nowadays it's a little bit more of a -- wondering. We wonder are we exactly right for each other. Are we chemically balanced, or can our genes mix? And that's what I think.

What preachers preach. But a speaker get a chance to speak on what comes to mind. And just like my daughter brought to mind that she came from me, and she have had my granddaughter. And that put me in the mind of me coming from my mother, and my mother coming from her mother, and that's what puts you in the mind of who begot who, and that will take you all the way back to your Biblical outstanding lifetimes, or life being with you on Earth. No problems for you to get historically involved in yourself. A lot of peoples don't get historically involved in themselves, because they say, "Well, it was so much ugliness in my life until I wanted to leave. I just don't want to think about it, I don't want to care about it." Why not? Why not? All we gotta do is remember who we were, and what we were put here on Earth for. And see ourselves in those positions.

GK: Let me ask you about your childhood, because it sounds as if you didn't have a very easy time of it when you were a kid.

LH: Heh. I didn't have a childhood, I don't think. I think in a sense, I got a chance to play on the playground like other children, and I don't whether this could be one of the first stops that we can go to, that we can just go and show up at the back door of my elementary school and knock on the door. And maybe we just surprise them and say, "Well, Lonnie Holley wanted to show me where he went to elementary school and he knocked on the door." And if the principal will let me in, we'll go in there and ah, we'll see what kinda childhood I did have as a child.

As remembering my childhood, there was not very much play for me. There were no toys hardly for me, there were no play time. My mind wasn't even on playing. My mind was really on seeking to find where my mother were. All of my time mostly was spent on trying to imagine or trying to find out where my mother was or who was I?

GK: So you didn't grow up with your mother?

LH: No, I grew up in a foster home. I grew up as Tunky McElroy. I didn't grow up as Lonnie Holley.

GK: That's amazing. Well, how did that happen?

LH: I, ah, was taken away from my mother at the age of one and a half and I was taken to Ohio by this woman, and the woman was a whiskey drinker, and when the woman got back ah, from Ohio, she got back to Alabama and ah, the hot part of Alabama at that time was around the State Fairground out on Lomb Avenue, because there would be a lot going on there during fair periods.

And the house that I stayed in was right around, well, maybe a half a block from the gate--no more than two blocks from the gate that you enter into the State Fairgrounds. So I was in a very hot – as far as energy is concerned, all those humans just passing by. I told you I was always in the midst of a lot of people, because I started working at five years old right there at the drive-in theater that was behind the house.

So between the drive-in theater and a bunch of peoples coming in every night and I'm having to pick up paper after those peoples every morning. See, I had always been cleaning up behind people, but my art took it to another level of what to do with it once you've collected it up, Lonnie Holley? Do you burn it up? Do you bury it? So it was always like a question in my mind. How much room is in my bag for this that I got to pick up? And, heh, and one thing about cleaning up, that was a thing that I learned, but never learning to work fast enough to please people.

Even Mr. Campbell was always on my case, "You gotta be through with this, you got that whole back part of the drive-in theater that you had not cleaned up, why you hadn't cleaned up, why you didn't pick up that paper over there?" There was always questions of why I didn't do enough to please people. And then, being in that kind of predicament, after she sold me, I went through some changes. At four years old I remember getting punched in my head with a poker iron, because that's when she brought me back to Alabama at the age of four and she sold me to this lady for a pint of whiskey.

GK: Who did?

LH: Ah, I don't even know her name, but she had told my mama she was gonna keep me. That's the reason why I believe I am a twin, because I believe my mama actually had two of us, and at the time that she had the two children, she couldn't contend with both of us, so this lady come by and asked her to let her keep me for a while. And she never did bring me back to my mama, she just brought me back to Alabama, but maybe thinking that she had kidnapped me, taking me to Ohio for four years, she brought me back to Alabama and she sold me to this, to this whiskey house. And Big Mama took me in, Mrs. McElroy. And when Mrs. McElroy took me in, she actually ran the lady away, asking her what the hell she means trying to sell a four-year-old child for a pint of whiskey.

So she took me out of this drunk woman's hands, and I was malnourished, I was skinny, very po'. They said that I mostly ate candy and maybe got some meat on the weekend when the lady did get around to make money. So I'm sure that the lady was a prostitute or made the money off of, you know, being with mens that drunk on the weekends. So you can see me being that kind of child for that lady. And Big Mama taking me out of that kind of atmosphere, putting me in a house, giving me clothes. Growing me up.

I started working at five years old at the drive-in theater right behind 'em, and I worked there until I got...Well, at seven years old, I really started running away then, because Big Mama died. And I was blamed for her death, but I really didn't know that she was – I didn't know nothing about death. Back in them days, they would take a chair, and prop it up in the bed, put a pillow on the back of that chair, and that would keep the person from swallowing their spit and choking to death in their sleep. You cannot leave an old person, that falls into deep sleep, flat on their back, because they can choke to death, they can strangle to death.

A lot of times in our old folks' home, or you know, places where we – (*Angela's voice in background*) OK, you going to get Kayla, OK, I'll see you in a little bit. Well, what I'm just simply saying is, there is ways that we have to learn, and I was [effectively] an orderly, I was [like] the guy that works in the old folks' home. A lot of things that I learned from other old people, was passed down to my mind. I wanta say it like that because our minds are the keeper, it's the bank, it's the memory bank. And

if we don't learn to be thankful for that memory bank that we have, we will never be really Earthkeepers. We will never turn out to be what we was born to be.

And those memories is really the keys to our success in life. It's keeping those memories, keeping them churned. I used to take and churn milk, put the milk right out of the cow in a churn... And that some stuff called the cream would rise to the top. Sometimes it takes a god 3-4 hours to churn a good churn of milk. That taught me patience—how to churn that milk and that milk would turn into butter. I know how to milk a cow. I know how to do everything an old man knows how to do...And when I get to talking about some of these things that those old people's had touched and used in their daily lives. The door knobs and the doors and the screen doors and the things they used to come through. The clocks, the alarm clocks to get up by. The old frying pan that sat upon the old stove, that used wood, that you had to go out with your axe and sledge hammer to bust up the logs and chop up the wood and get the kindling and make the fire to bake the bread and make the cake. It was hard times. It was really the way you did'n them things. Back in them days, nobody said it was hard times to go out and chop wood. It was the natural thing to do. We got out there and we bust those logs and we sawed down those trees and we did that.

You say, "All of that was in your life young man?" That's what I would say to that old lady that would say "Amen" or that old man that would say "Halleluyah, he's finally saying the right thing to those children. He's talking about those old habits" And we should keep those habits as part of our life.

When you look at my Environment, it's a used-to-be, its not a-right-now. It's what I had done--and I left it just like that and it rotted as it was. In a sophisticated manner, they call it ruins. But it my manner its called deteriorating and decaying right there as it lay. In a archeology point of view, wouldn't you say that 20 years is enough to call it history? Five more years and its part of a century. I dunno what makes a century, 25 years?

GK: 100 years.

LH: So I've already donated a quarter of a century to working here. This is a quarter of a century of knowledge, wisdom, materials—basic education of what these materials are made of. [*Holley touches a piece of wood*] Wood? What kind of wood?

Pine? Cedar? Oak? In my Environment it shows you the deterioration of all kinds of wood. [*He picks up a jacket*] This old jacket, Angela didn't want it no more so I didn't take it to the flea market, I didn't take it to Good Will. Instead I used it in my set. But this is my child's coat. I found those river rocks down there—that wasn't natural down there. I brought every one of them rocks from some river or creek that me and my children walked in. Behind that, the iron you can see, I found that iron. And if you look at it you can see its embedded in the concrete itself to hold a foundation together. Because I realized that the children needed to see that old men was taking and mixing iron in the concrete in the city of Birmingham just to make the sidewalk. We had so much iron in this city that we was walking on streets of iron. We was walking on streets of materials that had came from our foundries. Our houses and buildings was built on what our industries had thrown away—and a lot of people didn't know it. But the surface of my Environment shows that. So I know how important that is. I never retreat from the kind of wisdom and knowledge that is here—I know that. It's all about the making of this city.

I always had great things to say about this city—I never wanted to say anything bad about it. We can't just become throne rulers or keepers of the throne and not talk about the eras of the throne's existence. We must be able to tell about the glory and the grandeur of our people's labor to make this city. And that's what I have been trying to do and say is that the contribution of the blacks of the Zion City and Airport Hills communities. Cause that's the airport right here.

Now when I leave from right here and step out on that road it belongs to the airport. So wherever I go, I'm in that triangle [*Demonstrates with hands*] I'm surrounded by the airport.

I can't create everything I think, but the things I do make turn out to look good, and when I finish with this [*Holds up a core sand sculpture*] I hope it has a lesson about it. And that's what I've been sitting up here doing while we were talking. I've been doing this—not just wasting time. I see a lot of mens and womens, the things that they have to do are so simple—and they complain about it. The things they have to do are so simple because they have not trained themselves to do nothing, that simpleness becomes so hard and so greatly against them to succeed and achieve.

A lot of time people say what about all those bracelets you wear? I hear someone behind my back say, "Look at all that junk he got on." I hear what they say, but they don't know a thing about n'ere one of these pieces of jewelry, these bracelets I got on my arm. They can only conceive it to be junk. And junk is a word we use—it's a word. You can be a junkie [laughs] You aint nothing but a junkie! You can be a food junkie. A TV junkie – you can be a house junkie, you can get to be a junkie at anything that you overjunk your mind with, or that is a junk. I'm a junkie in a sense; I go through all the junk just to get the best of the junk. That's stable and able enough to then take from that junk, what they call, but I just see that junk as material. Material junk. So we have to put two titles by the time I get through with it. Because it's going to be turned into material when I lay my eyes on it, "Ooh, wow, that's some good material."

I see it's tall enough for me to, to sit it up and I can make something tall out of this, I see that I can take strings and I got three of 'em I can tie together and because of the profiles and the images and the scales and sizes and ah, the way I've seen things, then that would make me see them in different positions and know how to skillfully bring them apart, know how much distance it takes to make something stand up.

So, as an artist, and, and when I see a piece of material, my mind shoots right into examining it, researching the whole length or width of it, and, and also my mind goes into how long is it gonna last me, or will it break, is it 'rotteney', or is it good or bad, or, is, is it still good enough piece of material for me to bring here. 'Cause I don't just bring anything here. I never did, although out of...I been here since 1979, and I just don't bring anything here.

Now, if you would reach back behind you right there, pick up that jar, down in that hole, there's a jar down in that hole – now th'ow that to me. I'll catch it.

GK: O.K., I'm widening the shot so I can see it.

LH: All right. Now. No one would never believe that I found this and in it was the containment of it. No one would never believe it and you would of never knew that you told – that you just threw me toast and eggshells. This is a bottle full of toast and eggshells. And I found hundreds of these behind in the house of an old lady, in Eastlake. And I opened it to



examine it at the time, and, and this right now, if I brought that to you, I'll show you, that whoever this lady was, she had devised something, but peoples did not know how to use it. And it keeps stuff.

It keeps it fresh. It keeps it fresh for a long time. Now take a look at that. These are eggshells. And toast. That a old lady had put in this jar.

Now, everybody kinda called the lady a witch or a fool because of the contents of her house, but I think the lady was in a sense a scientist, studying preservation, and how things could be preserved, and I think, you know, if I had a lotta, lotta eggshells where I would have to go and I'd find boiled eggs or somebody's Easter egg hunt, or somebody's that just peeling eggs that have to be boiled, I would collect up all their shells, or if you got to a store, now or a café now, and we think about it, at some point we gonna have to be able to recycle things down to its lowest terms, and will Lonnie Holley be the one that will be able to come up with a conceived way of recycling everything?

Recycling everything, all the way down to bone, so we don't have to throw away that many bones. So we don't have to throw away that many eggshells. But do we wanta do that? It's a couple of questions asked in this bottle. Do we wanta preserve things or break them down all the way where we don't know what nothing was? Now, we wanta make sure, and I think this what this Environment do - that it shows even though Lonnie Holley had thousands of pieces of plastic, thousands of pieces of Styrofoam, thousands of pieces of wood, maybe millions of pieces of wood - of all sorts. How do we take these things serious in our uses of today?

How do Birmingham, Alabama, look at Lonnie Bradley Holley and all the things that he have? How am I used in the whole systematic order? I have everything here from crime prevention to fire prevention to earth-ah-unconcernminded prevention - it's just - everything here.

GK: Well, let me ask you about that - what do you - what did you think when you found that jar?

LH: When I - when I found this, because of the information that I had got about the lady, [*Angela returns*]- aren't you

going to pick up some laundry now? Might as well, huh?  
Excuse me, George...

[A brief pause]

GK: So how – so how old were you when the woman took you up to Ohio?

LH: I was one and a half, then.

GK: Uh huh. And you reckon your mother let her take you because she was...

LH: She just had told my mom, as far as what they told me, she just had told my mom she wanted to keep me, she didn't tell my mom she's gonna take me out of town. So she stole me in a sense.

GK: And when she came back, she also couldn't look after you very well, and so that's when she sold you?

LH: Well, being an alcoholic...

GK: Do you remember anything about those times?

LH: I remember, just like I said, I remember getting poked in the head 'cause I was crying, I think the first bit of real serious pain for me, and I always remember that. I remember growing up – I remember picking up the paper – I remember five, six years old, I remember six and I remember starting to school. I remember seven years old, I remember all my playing, going up and down the streets, going to – going to work, picking up paper, going to school. Just every day I did the same thing.

GK: Were you happy? At that time?

LH: Were I happy? I 'magine. Hadn't nobody told me about my mom and my big family, so hadn't nobody broke the ice of who I were. I was just Tunky McElroy. So I was just Tunky McElroy. But when Miss Claudie told me that I had a mother and she had all these children, then it was like everything about Tunky McElroy faded. And she say, "Your grandfather's name Holley". She say, "Your grandmamma is named Hixie Canady." And she say, "I, I danced with your daddy,"  
(chuckles)

So this woman messed up my mind, I didn't want, I didn't wanta really – And that was after Big Mama had died and then he had, started whipping on me then, the man that I stayed with, Mr. McElroy.

LH: Mrs...Mrs. McElroy died.

GK: Yeah.

LH: But, Claudie, Miss Claudie was his, one of his girlfriends that he got after Mrs. McElroy was dead and Miss Claudie didn't like the way he would whip me, so she told me about my family and – because she really in a sense saying, “You can get away from this.”

GK: Hmm.

LH: Because he really don't deserve you. So, --

GK: What did you make of that?

LH: What? Telling me about my family?

GK: Yeah.

LH: It jus—every night, I tried to wonder where they was. And who they was and why they was. And how would I act around them? I didn't have no family, it was just me in that house, he didn't have no children, and these was old people. So my friends that came to play with me or whatever, I didn't have but a few of them, and a lot of time he would run them out from around me, when we did try to get together and play. 'Cause there was a street between us, Lomb Avenue and if I go across the street they'd be scared I would get hit by a car.

GK Is that house still standing?

LH: No, it's a, it's a lounge which is right there right now and I don't know whether that property was left in my name or not. It might be mine and I don't even know it. But what I'm just simply saying is -- in Tunky McElroy, it may be in his name -- because I don't think the man, he really was working for Birmingham Paper Company when he died, and his sisters lived'd in some, it was a part of Mississippi, they took me to Mississippi one time, with them to visit his sisters.

And, ah, after I started growing up, after getting hit by the car and staying in, in the hospital for the three months that I stayed in there, and I finally got well, so he waited for about a year and he whupped me for getting hit by the car. *(Laughter.)* That was at eight years old, by the time that... So by nine years old, I was running away. I was more intense on trying to find Mama at that time, and I couldn't even find my way from over there on Lomb Avenue to Woodlawn. State Fairgrounds is down in West End, I couldn't find my way from West End to Eastlake, it was just that complicated for a young man to cross the city.

I didn't know the buses to take; I was still going to school. And I think I did run away at nine years old, trying to get over on this side of town, and got on top of a train, thinking that the train gone bring me on this side of town, that's what I thought. But I woke up the next morning in New Orleans, and you just read that about that in a lot of the books.

I woke up the next morning in New Orleans with a – I had stole a quilt off of a lady's line, and wrapped myself up in it. Patched quilt they made out of patches of old clothes, and I laid right between the two exhaust pipes, so I had got fully sooted, I was black. Face was black, all my hands that was like that was black, so when I climbed down off the train in New Orleans, the man thought I was a voodoo doll. He went running all around the place, he was in there washing the train down with a bucket of water and a big old sweep broom. The engine had to be clean.

So I climbed down off of it and boy that man really went wild. I didn't know where I was, I just saw a grown man running around, "Oh, what the hell is this? What is this?" You know, he was really scared. And that was my first experience with voodoo and hoodoo, because they said that that man thought I was a voodoo doll *(chuckles)* -- I never- I really never knew that I could never get that out of my mind, that I'd scared that man almost to a heart attack, just by having soot on me. And people's fear was just that great. And he was afraid.

GK: How'd you get back?

LH: Ah, I got back about three months later. Because of Big Daddy, the man that I was staying with, he called him "Uncle", he was a great man, he was wonderful. I would have to say that he was a great man, I never knew his name, to this day,

but if I go in the spiritual realm, I can always find his spirit there, telling me to be good, be kind, give unto others as I would have them to give unto me.

GK: This is somebody you met in New Orleans?

LH: Yes, he just took – out of the blue -- this man that was scared, after the, after I took this quilted thing off of me, he realized that I was a young boy, and he gave me some money to go get a baloney sandwich 'cause I were hungry. And from getting the baloney sandwich, the lady behind the counter called Uncle, and Uncle had a kinda house where children could come and stay, if they were runaways.

He had everything. He had this wagon, and he would get on the wagon and be singing, and this wagon was loaded with pots and pans and all kinda fruits and vegetables from grapes to bananas to coconuts to, to collard greens, turnip greens, tomatoes, we had it on that wagon. And I learned how to be a peddler, with him. That's the reason I have so many things, but my wagon is a bigger wagon, it's an Environment.

Lotta people can't see my goodness. And I ask them, a lot of times I ask – “Do you all really appreciate me? Do you appreciate what I know?” Because I get sad in that, answering that, because I – that's the reason why I, I, I get hurt so easy, because I work so hard and I wonder, do these peoples that call theirselves legislators and lawmakers, judges and lawyers and doctors and teachers, professors, do they know what I am or who I am or what I am to society? I ask that even to Mayor Richard Arrington. Do he know what I've been for his administration? Do he know how much I prayed over all this material out of his city? I prayed over the garbage and the mess and the filth and the BFIs (?) as I got in them, I prayed over it. (*Airplane noise.*)

I just didn't bring it home, I prayed over it. (*airplane noise.*) And if some people call me a high priest or a Dalai Lama, but will they realize that I am that, will they – and they know that this is holy ground, everything over here should be put under religious not just an Environment, but a highly religious Environment. Because I did these things in prayer. But will they respect that to that level, and I want respect that. They would prefer to call it junk and garbage and have the bulldozers, because they had not worked and they will not work and they will not get outta their Cadillacs or come outta

their fine carpet, plastic-covered couches, wonderful Sheetrock painted-white walls, with something hanging on it, that they call art. Just one little picture of a duck satisfy their mind. Or one little picture of some field, or some landscape satisfy their mind. So it's a small mentality when they come outta their matchbox spaces.



That's what I said about this thing that's hanging behind you, New York, New York Big City Dream, But New York Ain't What It Seem. Because when I went to New York and with my visions, I had to take and break down every constructed order, and see all of that stuff that man had built, see all that stuff that woman had contributed, see all of their furniture and all the stuff that makes up the high-rise buildings and all that stuff, the iron and the steel frameworks -- see my mind was a mind that went to work on-- you say, do you think that you got a computerized mind? No, it's one that moves: woo woo woo woo woowo -- it's a mind that moves. And it ain't (chuckles) It ain't no simple mind.

And yours is the same, George King, if you look at all the things that you've looked at, and you had to think about 'em, woo woo, you have to go really real, so fast, you don't have no time to be putting on no brakes for nothing like that, and ignorance makes you put on brakes. Somebody come up there and -- that's stupid, or, or crazy, or lazy, or I don't call crazy,

crazy. I just say it's a lazy mind that wasn't willing to put itself to work, put itself on any perspective or focus on anything. And I'm not calling you all lazy and crazy, I'm just asking you to work that mind, work that mind, work it, put it to work. That's exercising it.

I see peoples out there exercising all day (*huffing and puffing*) – fat people, sweating, and look at me. I do this work right here and I keep myself at this limit, I may not eat a bunch, but I eat the salads and eat the sandwich and I drink me a drink, and I'll work. And I won't get fat, because I find enough to do. And there is enough for everybody to do, and I got a plan for that.

And one day George films will show you if hadn't already caught on to it. Or the books that I'm in will show you. And it's gonna be a matching set 'cause it's gonna be beautiful. The books that I will be in and the things that already have been portrayed of a person such as myself, and they call it *Orphan in a Storm*, the first, really the first book was *Another Face of the Diamond*.

So you mean to tell me that there is another face of a diamond that we can see? Do that mean that I can wear the diamond upside down just as right as wearing it upside right, in my ring? Will it be acceptable to my sight or your sight? Would you say, "Hey, you got your diamond backwards"? But isn't that another face of it? Couldn't I see another point of view? Or would I see the sunshine and all the little hit sprinkles of rain that hit the diamond to cause it to flicker the different colors and colorations? Isn't that the beauty that we s-

What it is, that you search for in that little piece of glass rock, that makes it so expensive to your taste? And you don't mind paying for that. Am I not another face of the diamond that you did not look at? Am I not greater than the gold that gripped that diamond and holds it on your finger? Or would you pay fifty thousand dollars for a diamond ring, or I'll go up to a person such as Michael Jackson or Janet Jackson or Stevie Wonder or Bill Cosby, or Joe Leonard or someone like Arsenio Hall, or what's that guy that play on "Let's Make a Deal", or Elliott Ness of the Untouchables, I know that man if he's still alive, the last time I saw him, or to the grave of Sammy Davis, Jr., Martin Luther King, go to the grave of someone like Gandhi, from India, someone like Malcolm from America, someone like Garvey from Africa, someone like Christophe from Haiti, someone like Baldwin from France and find these

black images to be high thinkers, and high thinkers thinking constantly, doing something with the human mind to develop. And them being the ones that they call earthly stars.

It's our production from our minds that gave us the stardom. I'm just one without funds, or money. I worked all this without money, I, I – nobody ain't paid me for my skills or my titles. Every title, if I was paid for every title that I've given, the way that singers or actors or sports – if the arts was higher than sports, arts was higher than acting. Theater came after art. Sports was a pastime to make sure you kept strong, it was not in the major museums. Art was commissioned and nobody had not commissioned me; I wish somebody hadda commissioned me.

Bill [Arnett] stifled me with as much as he could, William Arnett. He did that because he knew that I could develop and he helped me with that, but as far as do peoples just go out and say, "I'm gonna give this guy a hundred million dollars and he would never have to worry – let him do everything he want to do in his own lifetime" – to an artist? No, but they'll do it for a basketball player, because the basketball player is a member of a group, and a group is a team of people playing for a certain body. And most of the time this body is "university", schools, high schools to elementary. and we even got the kindergartener babies football players now.

So we are looking at a team of peoples helping somebody. I didn't have that team; I only had me, myself and I. "Myself" being the spiritual part. "I" being the all and all, being that part of me that was able to render my focusing ability from here, to a kind of birds-like wings on my mind that my mind could light on this, I could light there, I could light there, if I wanted to be where you were, I could find you and light there, all you had to do is give me your address, and I found a map, I wouldn't have to come to your house. Be there.

But I choose to be most of the time with my mind in a universe, because I can always come back down to earth and land on a tree or, or land on a plant and tell you that the leaves are being ate up by a certain amount of insects or because of the ground and the water of it, it's dying or it's unhealthy, or I can always land on a tree in my mind and tell you, "Well, that tree there is gonna crack" or I can look at a tree and tell you what branch is gonna break before other branches are liable to break. 'Cause all we gotta do is look at



the damage in other limbs, and I hope that this helps peoples to find out to go out sometime – look up! And Jack Horkheimer on this space program, looking into space, I view those kind of things.

GK: Let me ask you, about that, that thought process, when did you discover you could do that?

LH: It developed. I think it were developing during the time I was doing sandstone. But I would find myself freezing or locking on and focusing right there, I can lock on and focus right there, and a hundred thousand peoples could come around me and be talking to me all day long, but I, as long as I don't break, long as I don't break that right there, I can keep hitting that right there. [*Holley is repeatedly tapping a twisted rebar "S" in the same spot.*] See, I can keep hitting that right there. Now I got my mind right there. I still got my mind right there, and I'm looking around, but my mind is still right there.

Every now and then, I see something that I like over there, so my mind then focus on that. But you can have a wide vision of seeing things. My mind is on this right here, but my sight is on the S, now to figure the S out, that's when I started missing this, because I got to take my mind from focusing on this and focus on the shape of the S.

So what I'm trying to say about the human mind, is the power of the human mind is for us to control it, and what is that control? And the teachers try to tell us that all the time, they told us when we first did it and it was called "thinking". She said, "Think about everything you do." Thinking allowed us to focus. Focusing allowed us to – you see, do what was necessary with our minds. Thinking about it – and then my mind say, "Get a grip!" [*Holley grasps the rebar metal "S"*] "I got a grip." "Hold that grip." Move everything, I can move this whole thing just by having a grip, you see. Not being afraid, get a grip, knowing that I gripped it right, I'm not gonna pinch my skin unless I pull this metal too tight against each other. So you learn how not to tear up something.

LH:...we gonna split here and go and talk to my sister, her name is Shirley Williams.